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ILLINOIS WOMEN OF THE MIDDLE PERIOD.

BY ARTHUR CHARLES COLE

The American West has traditionally been pictured in the figure of the sturdy pioneer whose trusty rifle warned off the hostile red-skin, whose powerful axe challenged the wilderness and fashioned his rude cabin, and whose hoe and plow broke the soil for the rudimentary agriculture that meant life to the first generation of frontiersmen. It remains to be shown that the conquest of the western wilds was conditioned upon the domestic partnership in which the pioneer woman played no minor role. The heroine of the frontier was not merely, as some one has said, that "gaunt and sad-faced woman sitting on the front seat of the wagon, following her lord where he might lead, her face hidden in the same ragged sunbonnet which had crossed the Appalachians." Hers was more than the role of housewife—of feeding a lord and master and his progeny and administering to their physical comforts. She kept the house, to be sure; she did the quilting, the washing, the preserving of beef and pork; she made the candles and the family clothes. But the frontier woman had other occupations, the nature and significance of which have found little understanding in later generations.

The "women folks" of the frontier "could allus find something to du" around the barns and sheds, and, more, in the fields themselves.¹ The realm of woman's work did not end at the threshold of her lord's domain. She was his partner and together they labored toward the goal of success. She must share his burdens, but she did so as his equal. It was not, then, commands to an inferior that secured her co-operation; it was a tribute to a sex equality which had its place in that pure democratic atmosphere of the frontier.

The very hardships of the frontier tore down old customs and established new values. But, just as the frontier was a

¹See Tillson, Christiana Holmes, *A Woman's Story of Pioneer Illinois*.

moving and changing force, so conditions altered themselves with the steady flow of the westward movement. The second generation was better able to respond to the appeals of eastern customs and traditions, even to transplant them to western soil. One very suggestive index of the passing of the frontier can be found in the new status of women and their new reaction to life about them. The frontier departed before the forces that made for specialization and for a division of labor, and woman's sphere was redefined by the same forces.

As the frontier lingeringly bade its adieu, leisure moments came to the wives and mothers of the West; and, simultaneously, a blind groping for pursuits to take the place of frontier occupations. The result was a larger part by women in organizations for social and educational purposes. They became active along religious lines; they formed sewing societies, reading circles, women's clubs; they came, particularly in Indiana, to take a leading part in library associations. The women began also to bear the burden of the responsibility of the work of organizing the anti-slavery crusade; the men were often quite "content with the humbler task of co-operation by supplying the sinews of war." The West still showed less consciousness than the East "of any conflict between the peculiar duties of men and those of women in their relations to common objects."²

In the late forties, the frontier passed slowly from the prairies of Illinois to the trans-Mississippi West. Simultaneously the pioneer woman began to disappear. Her successor not only had less taste for heavy physical tasks but even aspired to the eastern role of "lady." This required domestic service from servants engaged to take the place of the mistress. The resident population furnished few young women who failed to share the western spirit of optimism and opportunity to the extent of accepting the lot of an inferior group. Attention was drawn therefore to the surplus female population of the eastern cities; by co-operation with the Women's Protective Immigration Societies of New York and Philadelphia, the women of the prairie towns of Illinois were supplied with a quota of domestic helpers who

²Macy, *the Anti-Slavery Crusade*, 46. "There was complete equality between husband and wife because their aims were identical and each rendered the service most convenient and most needed. . . Women did what men could not do." *Ibid.*, 47.

relieved still further the labor pressure upon the western wife and mother.³

This relief left opportunity for other types of feminine enterprise. The sewing society, with all its ramifications, was the obvious stopgap; but it alone did not suffice. At times of stress it enlarged its scope still farther, as when the women of Chicago were aroused by bleeding Kansas to organize a "Kansas Women's Aid and Liberty Association," with active auxiliaries in the towns and villages of northern Illinois. Even the less courageous sewing societies took a part in the work for the relief of the distressed sisters in Kansas.⁴

A new crusading spirit drew the women into the ranks of the temperance movement. In 1850 "Ladies' Temperance Unions" or societies appeared in the chief cities and towns to aid in the organized attack upon liquor. County organizations followed, and in 1856 a call was sent out by women of Chicago and vicinity for a state convention to organize a Women's State Temperance Society. All of these organizations demanded literary activity from their members in the preparation of addresses; they also gave to the women of the state some of their first experience in speechmaking. In 1885, Mrs. Fonda, an agent of the New York Ladies' Temperance Society, made an extensive lecture tour through Illinois. One of her first addresses was in Springfield, where she spoke before an audience of citizens and members of the legislature. She even penetrated into "darkest Egypt" where, according to one of its spokesmen, "the use of intoxicating drinks seems more natural than the use of water." At every point she was met with a cordial welcome, with good audiences, and with generous collections.⁵ Many of her audiences were strongly impressed by their first experience in listening to the eloquence of a woman lecturer.

But there was emotion as well as intelligence in the women's part in the temperance movement. The time called for a St. George to slay the "Demon Rum" and the women entered the field. Enraged feminine victims of the liquor traffic enlisted under the banners of local prototypes of Carrie Nation and were led in destructive assaults against the of-

³See Cole, *Era of the Civil War*, 15.

⁴*Chicago Weekly Democrat*, June 21, 28, 1856.

⁵Mrs. Fonda at the close of her tour congratulated herself on the "very large, still and respectful audiences," and "generous contributions made by them." See her letter of April 23, 1885, to the *Cairo City Times* in the issue of May 2, 1885.

fending groggeries; armed with hatchets, rolling pins, broomsticks, kitchen knives and fire shovels, they routed the enemy, leaving empty barrels and broken glasses and decanters to decorate the streets. One of the first of such raids occurred in Milford, Iroquois county, in 1854; Lincoln had a similar party in 1855; in the following year twenty or thirty women of Farmington, "backed up and protected by a crowd of 300 men and boys," cleaned out every grogshop in the community and secured so much applause from the newspaper of the neighboring town of Canton that the temperance women of the community came to the rescue of the city's prohibitory ordinance by raiding the shop of an offender and resolved that as often as the practice was resumed in the community, they would rid themselves of its curse, "peaceably if we can, forcibly if we must." Women in the town of Winnebago not only emptied the casks of a local liquor dealer but treated him to a ride out of town on a rail (Rock River Democrat, August 31, 1858). All these served as precedents for later raids until it became a question as to whether city officers could wipe out the liquor traffic by law enforcement or whether it would be left to the women. As the *Aurora Beacon*, May 13, 1858, facetiously and ungrammatically put it: "We wait to see who to throw up our hat for—the Women, or the City Officers." Many of the local newspapers accorded these militant tactics a silent approval; the editor of the *Ottawa Free Trader*, however, called such measures "high-handed, lawless, and not to be approved" and the *Joliet Signal* held that the husbands of the women should be compelled to pay damages since "such outrages upon the property and rights of others are becoming too frequent."⁶ At one time it was rumored that one of the married women of Aurora had been arrested at the suit of a local whiskey seller, although no raiding party had been staged, with the result that the women held an indignation meeting and adopted a set of stirring resolutions.⁷

These aggressive movements of the women doubtless attracted more attention than their active efforts in the regularly organized temperance movement. In the main they worked quietly and in good temper, "in a spirit of kindness," read a flattering account in the *Rockford Register*, December

⁶*Ottawa Free Trader*, April 10, 1854; *Joliet Signal*, June 8, 1858

⁷*Rockford Register*, March 13, 1858.

25, 1858. "We believe," wrote the editor, that "the movement which the ladies have initiated for the attempted suppression of the liquor traffic, to be justifiable, and a legitimate sphere for her labors for the suppression of a vice in which she is so largely the sufferer." Temperance reform was materially furthered by the women who confined their activities to writing and delivering addresses and sending them to the newspapers for publication.⁸

In time signs began to appear that women would demand admission into the professional field. Pioneer women editors, preachers, and physicians in the East began to attract considerable attention. Mrs. Jane Gray Swisshen's venture as editor of the *Pittsburg Visitor* received wide notice; her views on the rights of women were extensively clipped and her editorial efforts together with those of Mrs. Anne E. McDowell in her *Philadelphia Women's Advocate* were variously applauded and condemned by the editorial fraternity of Illinois. In March, 1855, the *Belleville Advocate* announced that it expected shortly "to have the pleasure of introducing to the notice of our readers another new paper, published nearer home, and edited by a lady friend of ours. We masculines had better look to our time-honored 'rights.' When women invade the sanctum and mount the tripod, it is time that a voice were raised in remonstrance; else, we may find like Othello, when too late to apply a remedy, that our 'occupation's gone.'"⁹

For the time few complained against the traditional monopoly of the male sex in professional occupations. Marriage or hopes of marriage held the interest of most women, for as yet the male demand for domesticity was insatiable in a section where woman was in a marked minority. The first women in Illinois to demonstrate publicly their ability to compete with men in the professions were emissaries carrying the gospel of "woman's rights" from the East. Such in a sense was the case even with Mary A. Livermore, who for a time concealed her activities behind the name of her husband, an eastern Universalist minister who located first at Quincy and then in Chicago. Mrs. Livermore was a frequent contributor to denominational papers and was probably the

⁸See *Rockford Register*, December 25, 1858; *Aurora Beacon* February 4, 1858.

⁹*Belleville Advocate*, March 14, 1855; cf. *Ill. State Journal*, July 23, 1850.

“real editor” of *The New Covenant*, the Universalist organ at Chicago which carried her husband’s name on the editorial page. In this way she laid the foundation for her later role of leadership in the woman’s movement.

The early woman preachers naturally aroused considerable excitement. In 1853 the Reverend R. F. Ellis, Baptist minister at Alton, rejoiced that he was at length able to scotch the rumor that Miss Antoinette L. Brown had been ordained as Baptist pastor of South Butler, Wayne county, New York; he felt relieved that her denominational connection was with another sect, the Congregationalist; but regretted that the act of ordination had taken place in a Baptist house of worship. He could only hope that the Baptists had repented of having allowed the use of their building for this purpose, “so repugnant to Baptist usages.”¹⁰

Within four years his Baptist flock experienced almost directly the invasion of a woman preacher. About 1857 a Mrs. Hubbard came to Madison county and requested the privilege of speaking in the old Mount Olive meeting house outside Alton; a storm of protest arose from the male members of the Baptist congregation but when the objections were broken down, a crowded house greeted the innovator. Thenceforth she was received with a hearty welcome in all her appearances before that congregation.¹¹ Another early itinerant woman preacher of the late fifties was Mrs. Lily Henry, who later made her home at Bunker Hill, Illinois. The precedent established in the cases of Mrs. Hubbard and Mrs. Henry seems to have cleared the atmosphere of much of the opposition to woman preachers, so that those who followed in their footsteps encountered fewer obstacles.

The woman teachers of early Illinois were largely eastern emigrants. In the period after 1847 the Illinois Education Society and the National Educational Society, through its agent, Ex-Governor Slade of Vermont, cooperated to transfer systematically to the West classes of young women as missionaries in the cause of education. Illinois received a large share of these importations which were enthusiastically welcomed. Western advocates of education only complained that they were not brought on fast enough to make up for constant

¹⁰*Alton Courier*, October 13, 1853.

¹¹Stahl, “Early Women Preachers in Illinois,” in *Illinois State Historical Society, Journal* IX, 484-485.

desertions. The demand for wives was often greater than that for teachers, so that two-thirds of them abandoned the professional field and settled down to domestic life before a period of five years had elapsed. "Instead of teaching other folks' children," remarked a contemporary, they "soon find employment in teaching their own."¹²

Meanwhile provision was made for training a local supply of teachers at the new state normal school and young women began to be attracted to this opportunity to secure economic independence. Thus constantly did the professional horizon for the female sex widen; by 1859 there graduated from Sloan's Central Commercial College of Chicago "the first class of ladies who have received a thorough commercial education in the West, if not in the United States."¹³

By this time the much talked of woman's rights movement had borne down upon Illinois from the East. There was a good deal of confusion as to just what this movement covered. Liberal-minded editors, like John Wentworth of the *Chicago Democrat*, admitted that the laws were "oppressive toward women in many respects;" "Let woman plead earnestly, boldly," he urged, "with brothers, sons, and husbands, . . . for justice and her rights, and she uses a power that will prove effective." "But," he warned, "let her not aspire to become equal with man."¹⁴ William H. Sterrett was known as a strong woman's rights advocate in the general assembly where he sponsored such legislation as giving the wife separate and independent fee in her own property. Other men who represented radical movements of the day found courage to present the new woman's propaganda before the public; the versatile H. Van Amringe of Chicago pleaded for woman's rights and listed the cause with land reform and abolition in his lecture repertoire.

Neither such advocates nor the woman champions who entered the lists advocated the widening of the suffrage franchise or the eligibility of women to office-holding. Admitting a distinct sphere for womankind, the woman's rights forces insisted upon the injustice of contemporary legal discriminations as to property-holding, and in addition

¹²*Illinois State Journal*, November 28, December 1, 1848; *Illinois State Register*, December 2, 1851, August 4, 1853.

¹³*Chicago Press and Tribune*, May 19, 1859.

¹⁴*Chicago Weekly Democrat*, September 17, 1853.

claimed those rights, the denial of which would defraud woman's very nature. Confined to the narrow training of the contemporary female seminary or college, shut out of the high schools and colleges, many women labored to secure for their sex equality in education. "Let women be educated," urged one champion, "'Tis her right, not the fashionable education of the boarding school, an education too often, of the head, at the expense of the heart! There are five kinds of education which every woman has a right to: intellectual, moral, social, physical, and industrial.'"¹⁵

Soon woman propagandists were busy on the platform, though at first limiting themselves to discourses to members of their sex on anatomy and physiology. In 1852 Mrs. J. Elizabeth Jones made an eminently successful lecture tour through the state followed, in the spring of the following year, by Mrs. Ann S. Bane. At the same time Miss Olive Starr Wait, niece of William S. Wait, the Illinois reformer, actively entered the field. Mrs. Bane had added the topic "woman's rights," to the subject matter of her lectures, while Miss Wait came to give her entire attention to that subject. For several years Miss Wait addressed large audiences made up of members of both sexes in all the important towns of southwestern Illinois, in the region about her native Madison county. She was a woman of unusual charm. "Her character, life and attainments stamp her as an ornament to her country, to her sex, to her race," declared the *Belleville Advocate*, after she had delivered a series of three lectures before an audience which unanimously requested her to prolong her stay and her work of education. Men and women applauded her efforts and advocated letting her give "the full length of the reins to her abilities under the guide of her angelic benevolence."¹⁶ In 1855 her lecture tour included the state capital. Miss Wait had a happy faculty of presenting her subject in a manner that offended few and attracted many. "For chaste elocution, happy illustration, beauty of diction and depth of pathos, these lectures have been but seldom equaled," wrote a discriminating patron.¹⁷ At the end of 1853 Lucy Stone visited Chicago and then started on a tour

¹⁵*Alton Courier*, January 27, 1854.

¹⁶*Belleville Advocate*, April 27, 1853. An occasional critic cited the bible position of woman: "Man was first formed, and placed at the head of all the works of the six days, and afterwards woman was taken from his side."

¹⁷N. M. McCurdy to Joseph Gillespie, December 15, 1858, Gillespie manuscripts, Chicago Historical Society. Miss Wait later became the wife of the Honorable Jehu Baker.

of the state on a feminist mission. Her womanly earnestness combined with a manly energy could not but command respect. "How differently appeared the cause of woman's rights as set forth by Miss Stone," commented a critic instinctively inclined to sympathize with the movement.¹⁸ Another active propagandist of the same period was Mrs. Frances D. Gage of St. Louis who lectured extensively in the central portion of the state.¹⁹ In 1858 Horace Mann, the Massachusetts educator, visited the state and delivered a lecture at Ottawa on the subject of "Woman."

A good deal of discussion was aroused by these stimuli. The removal of legal restrictions on woman found an increasing number of supporters, even in the legislative halls at Springfield. A letter even went the rounds of the newspapers purporting to have been written by Stephen A. Douglas to Lucy Stone, giving an endorsement of her cause; it proved, however, to be a hoax which Miss Stone indignantly repudiated: "It is not to such men that the Woman's Rights cause appeals for help."²⁰ Men were found, like the editor of the *Aurora Beacon*, who openly professed no objections to the extension of the rights of suffrage to women: "It will not make them less lovely nor injure their dispositions. Their sense of right and justice is as clear, if not clearer, than ours; and their innate humanity, in which they greatly exceed us, will prove no invaluable aid in many cases where those great principles are involved. If they wish to vote, why should they not?"²¹

Not all the devotees were able to appreciate the full scope of the woman question in its legal, political, and philosophical implications. Sex emancipation for many women came to mean the elimination of the inequality that grew out of the traditions of a garb which by ancient custom make "our women feeble when they might be strong," "stooping when they might be straight," and "helpless when they might be efficient." Feminine dress would not permit the vigorous physical exercise which develops superior intellect, and man, thus deprived of the society of women in many of his avoca-

¹⁸*Free West*, January 5, 1854.

¹⁹*Illinois State Journal*, January 14, 1854; *Alton Daily Courier*, January 16, 1854; *Alton Weekly Courier*, October 5, 1854.

²⁰*Rockford Register*, September 24, November 5, 1859.

²¹*Aurora Beacon*, March 14, 1857. There was a tendency for the Republicans to show greater favor to the woman's movement than the Democrats, so that some of the latter complained of mixing up sex emancipation with negro emancipation.

See *Belleville Advocate*, August 17, 1853; *Joliet Signal*, June 17, 1856.

tions and diversions, regarded her as his inferior. This was the argument of the dress reformers, whose adherents demonstrated their seriousness in 1851 and again in 1858, when wearers of the bloomer costume, designed by Mrs. Bloomer of New York, made their appearance on the streets of various Illinois cities. In June, 1851, a correspondent signing herself as "Elizabeth" appealed to the *Illinois State Register*²² to come out in favor of short skirts; women, she said, decline longer to be "street-sweepers"—they wished to drop the long dangling mops that constituted the female dress: they wanted freedom of limbs and the opportunity of making the best of such charms as a pretty foot and ankle. The editor indulged in facetious equivocation, but already by that time several young ladies had taken matters in hand in Bloomington by appearing in the new bloomer costume and had secured the endorsement of the local editor. "They attracted the universal attention and admiration of all who saw them. We trust now that the ice is broken, the dress will be adopted by all," concluded the note on this new development in the *Bloomington Bulletin*.²³ Several prominent women of Joliet promptly adopted the costume and heroically adhered to it for street dress. The editor of the *Signal* noted a number whose garb "did not extend below their 'courtesy benders.' Well, whose business is it?" he asked. The editor of the *Aurora Beacon* applauded when certain young matrons made their appearance, "decked out in short dresses and pants, to the great discomfiture of fastidious husbands and a certain class of maidens, and to the unrestrained delight of young men and boys." "So far as our notions of this reform are concerned, we are free to say that with some slight improvements in the style adopted by the ladies referred to, we are decidedly in for it. The dresses are too long, the trousers should have been gathered and tied just above the ankles, and the head wear should consist of a hat or turban, *a la Turk*. . . . Go on, ladies, as you have begun. The enemies of this desirable reform may for a time turn up their noses at you, but rest assured that the more reasonable portion of the community are with you."²⁴ When the New Harmony plank road opening was celebrated by a dance at New Harmony in

²²*Illinois State Register*, June 26, 1851.

²³*Bloomington Bulletin*, in *ibid.*

²⁴*Aurora Beacon*, June 26, 1851.

November, 1851, the bloomer costume was worn by "many fair dancers."²⁵ Bloomer parties were held to keep up the courage of the innovators who braved the gaze of the curious and the sharp tongues of the town gossips. Many women, safe from the public eye, enjoyed the comfort and convenience which the new dress afforded for the performance of housework. The revival of 1857-8 was quite extensive. The dress reform forces organized themselves carefully in several communities. In Aurora the friends of dress reform of both sexes adopted a strong indictment of the prevailing style of dress, endorsed the "reform dress," and resolved "that we will, by precept and example, by word and deed, to the best of our ability, encourage a change in woman's apparel, that shall be in keeping with physiological laws: allow free motion to every part of the body, protect and cover, in a proper manner, the wearer and materially aid her in attaining that position side by side with man, neither above him nor beneath him, but his co-worker in life and its duties, equally capable of enjoying its pleasures, for which nature designed her, and give a more correct idea of the natural proportions of the human form."²⁶ A committee of two men and three women was then appointed to frame a constitution for the new "Dress Reform Association." Soon, however, the number of practicing converts declined and the untterrified became less zealous over their public appearances; the traditions of centuries triumphed over the would-be reformers. Other less dramatic features of the woman's movement absorbed the interest of those who were motivated by a *bona fide* feminist philosophy.

The Illinois woman's movement of the fifties—feeble and groping in all its efforts—was the infancy of the powerful force that emerged triumphant in the twentieth century. The Civil War made new demands and presented new opportunities to womankind. The scope of every activity was enlarged and intensified. Women found a broader field of service outside of as well as within the home. Their visions were enlarged as they listened to or participated in appeals for the negro freedom and his rights; they perceived the logic of the demand that members of their sex be accorded the same political privileges to which the former victims of chattel slavery

²⁵ *Graysville Advertiser*, in *Illinois State Register*, November 27, 1851.

²⁶ *Aurora Beacon*, April 8, 1858.

were admitted. The woman's movement became articulate and redefined itself in terms broader than those of the previous decade. In the middle period of Illinois history, therefore, the woman's movement was important mainly because it was a beginning and because this beginning was one of a number of pieces of testimony to the fact that the frontier was about to pass from the Illinois prairies.